

News Release

For Immediate Release

March 31, 2025

Ontario's Non-municipal Drinking-Water Needs Better Oversight and Support

(Toronto) Nearly 3 million Ontario residents (almost 20% of the population), as well as many businesses and other facilities, rely on non-municipal drinking-water supplies for drinking, preparing food, and bathing. While over 98% of all samples tested from non-municipal drinking-water systems over the past decade have met the Ontario Drinking Water Quality Standards, not all water is sampled and tested. “A lack of testing can expose Ontarians to risks”, says Auditor General Shelley Spence in a special report tabled today in the Legislature.

Owners of non-municipal drinking-water systems, including those regulated by the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) or the Ministry of Health (MOH), are required to sample their drinking water at a prescribed frequency for testing. However, private wells and surface water intakes that serve five or fewer residences, which are not considered to be drinking-water systems, have no testing requirements and are not included in this 98%. Drinking-water systems that do have testing requirements are generally not required to test for all contaminants. In addition, not all system owners test their water as required.

The audit report contains 17 recommendations from the Office of the Auditor General, for implementation by the two ministries, and the public health entities they oversee that are involved in the oversight of non-municipal drinking water.

The audit found that:

- Some small drinking-water systems have not been identified, assessed and inspected by Public Health Units (PHUs) overseen by MOH, posing a public health risk. These types of non-municipal systems serve six or more seasonal residences or a public facility, such as a hotel, restaurant or church.
- Many owners of small drinking-water systems did not sample their water as required, and PHUs rarely enforced compliance – 56% of the 1,660 systems reviewed missed at least one test sample in the past five years.
- MECP has effective processes to monitor and enforce compliance with sampling requirements of the non-municipal drinking-water systems that it regulates, but lacks the capacity to regularly inspect all 1,816 of these systems – 34% had not been inspected in over five years; 9% had not been inspected in over seven years.
- Studies indicate that less than one-third of the 1.3 million Ontarians that get their water from private wells test their drinking water. Of those who do test their water, 35% of samples test positive for indicators of bacterial contamination.
- MECP does not review well records for completeness and accuracy or for compliance with well construction requirements – of 195,232 well records submitted to MECP over the past 10 years, 54,931 were missing information about well usage, and 73,800 records were not fully processed as of August 2024.

- Potentially hundreds of thousands of abandoned wells have never been properly decommissioned, which can create a pathway for contaminants to enter groundwater and contaminate drinking-water sources.
- MECP has not fully assessed the feasibility of applying source water protection to non-municipal sources.

Spence added, “The United Nations recognizes access to safe water as a basic human right and one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders in 2015. Contaminated drinking water can cause gastrointestinal illnesses and other potentially serious health effects, which may result in significant economic costs due to hospitalizations, doctor visits, lost work days and other related costs. As demonstrated by the Walkerton crisis, the consequences of Ontarians drinking unsafe water can be deadly.”

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